

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Ash, Tony (1992) "Private Prayer and the Devotional Life," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss4/5>

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Private Prayer and The Devotional Life

by Tony Ash

Luke 6:12 is a unique text. It tells us that Jesus, before choosing the twelve and before preaching the Sermon on the Plain, spent the entire night in prayer. Many other passages give us glimpses into his prayers, but only this one depicts him doing it for such an extended period. We may not know the contents of his prayer, or the nature of his thoughts during those hours, but we are impressed with the importance of prayer to him, and thus with the significance prayer can have for us.

Some practicing Christians have many opportunities for public prayers, which in a sense are “thrust upon them.” These prayers are of enormous value in many ways. But the life of private prayer and devotion calls us to something deeper and more personal. Many schemes for private devotions have been offered and used with benefit by believers. I do not propose to offer another, but to discuss prayer and the devotional life from a broader perspective, before dealing with some specific issues.

It is important to keep in mind that prayer does not earn God’s blessing. He does not tell us, “if you do this, then you will deserve this.” Prayer should always remind us of our need, of God’s graciousness, and of the immense blessing the opportunity to pray offers. Though prayer may often be practiced as a “duty,” it is not one item on a check list of things we must do, “or else.”

What is prayer? This may be one of those things

of which we say, “I know what it is, but can’t define it.” Here is an attempt at definition, not derived from some theological volume, but from my own reflection. Prayer is the conscious addressing of the heart and mind to God. This address can include the giving of thanks and of praise, as well as the making of requests. Often it comes in a “formal” package, opened with the proper address to the Father, and closed with “in Jesus’ name. Amen.” But it may also come in meditations of a concentrated sort, or even in reflections through the day, as both are consciously addressed to God. It may be in an intense and focused period, or it may come in little snippets plugged in at odd times through the day. And it may not always be offered with the formal opening and closing mentioned above. God certainly knows when he is being addressed. One more suggestion is offered, not as a settled conclusion, but as a prick to thought. I once heard an entire life described as a prayer. Is this possible? Can a person live in such a way that the entire life *is* a prayer? If prayer is so defined, then we may pray more than we know.

Perhaps we are beginning our journey too far down the road, by assuming we are now in a praying situation. To pray at all we must begin with a sense of God. It must be a conviction of his reality, which is more than parroting a doctrine. We must have a sense of his involvement in this world, of his concern even for our insignificant lives, and of his desire to act on our requests. This is not always easy to believe.

We live in a world where we seek naturalistic explanations for things, and prayer stands outside that realm. Further, life frequently seems to us, as it did to many of the psalmists, as a place from which God is absent. We wonder why he allows such rampant wickedness; why bodies are ravaged and destroyed; why natural calamities terrify

us, destroying life and property. If he is God, and all powerful, why doesn't he do something about all this? Consideration of these things may create skepticism and bitterness, choking off any impetus to prayer. In such cases we might keep Job in mind, as well as the authors of Psalms 22, 39, 44, 88, and many others who continued to pray despite facing life's horrors.

We might well ask, as we consider our devotions, how much of our lives are lived with an awareness of God. Are there large segments of time in which we are simply unaware of him. not because we are engaged in sinful pursuits, but because we are allowing other interests to dominate our minds and bodies? Could it be that for many of us God just isn't allowed to figure in as we work or play. Perhaps we could work on consciously keeping God in the forefront mentally, so that any activity of life is practiced with that awareness. Could it be something like that which Paul had in mind in his exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17)?

Once the sense of God has impelled us to private prayer there are hindrances, familiar to all of us, that stifle the activity. We may have convinced ourselves that private devotions should always be emotionally charged "mountain top" experiences, which we complete in a highly elated state. May God grant us many such experiences. But truth to tell, most (all?) Christians would testify that such moments come rarely. Even after they have occurred, the next time prayer may be mundane and borderline drab. Do we then stop praying? Do our feelings about the experience say anything about God's response to us? No, God hears — despite our moods. Surely some of history's greatest prayers have come from times of dullness, or even from times of anguish (think of Gethsemane, or the prayers from the cross). So we come into the realm of duty. We pray as a duty. There is nothing wrong with this, and much that is right. We carry on a discipline, continuing the conscious relation with God, despite what at times may be satanic efforts to stop us.

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We may also be turned aside by depression which robs us of energy to do anything, much less pray. We convince ourselves nothing will do any good. We can prepare ourselves for these difficult times (most of us face them) by remembering that it is not God who

tells us prayer is useless. He does not wish us to "give up" no matter how depressed

our outlook. In these cases it may be helpful to be in a prayer covenant with others, so that their prayers on our behalf continue while ours falter. We might also remember that when we are depressed there is no better time than in prayer to bring our personal needs to God.

Anxiety sometimes deletes prayer from our lives. People can be so traumatized by personal struggles, or even by the world situation, that their minds are filled to capacity with worry about these conditions. They do not reject the value of prayer, but the swollen nature of other things has left no room in their minds for it. All they can think of is the sick relative, or the job stress, or the horrors of war in the world, or crime in their own city. Again, a prayer covenant with another person may help through such times. Prayer may also be rekindled if a friend or counselor can call such a person to a broader perspective than the one in which they are caught.

There will be those who have given up on private prayer through disillusionment, but of a different kind than that mentioned earlier in discussing God's seeming absence from a troubled world. Having been convinced of what God would do ("I know He will heal my wife's cancer."), they are dismayed when what they wanted so desperately did not happen. "If that is the kind of God he is, I want nothing to do with him!" Like Jeremiah, there may even be the feeling that God has lied, making promises he has not kept (see Jer. 20:7). It is hard to speak to such situations and to advise that people analyze their concepts of prayer. But the truth is that people often are convinced that God will do things he has not promised to do. There is no question of his power to do anything; thus, the issue is not power, but will or intent. God will, of course, finally do exactly what is right and best, not necessarily what we may want to be done. The power of personal prayer has often foundered on the rock of false expectations.

One more suggestion is offered. Prayer may suffer precisely because we are afraid God will an-

swer. If we should pray for his will to be done in our lives, for us to truly live so as to declare his holiness, for us to let the conditions of the kingdom be fully realized in us, what would happen to our lives? What cherished “little sins” must be put aside? How must we restructure our priorities of time, activity, money? We may not really want the things for which we so glibly ask. When we think seriously about the matter, we may decide that prayer, expecting an answer, puts us outside our comfort zone. Thus we choose comfort over commitment.

So far our remarks have tended to be on the negative side. This has been in an attempt to deal honestly with what many people feel. High-toned descriptions of the value of private devotion simply do not reach some people, who are still slogging through the muddy places, and their condition should be addressed. But let us move on. Looking at Jesus’ prayers that night in Gethsemane shows us an activity of immense value. Luke 5:26 tells us, he prayed often, even withdrawing from the multitude for solitary times with the Father. What is the value of such experiences in our lives?

Private prayer can have several dimensions that are impossible in public prayer. It will certainly be more personal, and more intimately relevant to our lives. We would not want many private matters made the subject of public prayer because they are too specific, or perhaps even too embarrassing. God knows everything, but that is no reason for the entire church to know. Private prayer can also be less distracted. Generally there are no little ones gurgling, nor teens giggling, nor oldsters snoring, nor the uneasy shifting. Because private prayer is not limited in time, it can be more intense, more complete, even more rambling, if that is appropriate. It is not limited by the time or the subjects chosen by the leader in public prayer, and thus has more “range.” It is not forced into certain channels by another, but can go wherever the praying person wishes.

So why pray? The most obvious answer is because God answers prayer, and things are changed. So he does, and so they are. But ought we not pray even if petition were no part of the experience, and if prayer were only thanksgiving and adoration? Prayer is for God’s glory and not an attempt to petition God to conform to our selfish desires. God does not need our prayers, but we need to pray them. Otherwise we may become, or have become, ungrateful and selfish.

We will return to the idea that God answers prayer. But we also pray because Jesus has invited us to do so (Luke 11:1-13). If we think about it, this is an amazing invitation. The Creator, the Savior, The Sustainer, has invited our words and promised to hear them. This invitation is not only an amazing opportunity but is a mandate we dare not refuse. It is an added blessing that the invitation anticipates we will make requests as it implores us to “ask, seek, and knock.”

We pray because it reminds us of our commitment to Christ. A life without prayer can be gradually shunted aside from the narrow into the broad way. Loss of faith is frequently gradual and includes simply forgetfulness. Prayer reverses that dangerous trend. Prayer brings us to the center of our lives. “Here I am again, returning to my true home.”

Prayer promotes dependence on God. The quintessential human sin is ego-centeredness, independence, the desire to rule our own lives. The greatest need is to be drawn away from this independence to God-centeredness. We can never have an oversupply of dependence on God. Prayer offers a replenishment we desperately need.

Prayer is the great reliever of anxiety. In these days of tension and rapid paced demands we should hear again Paul’s words about relief from anxiety through prayer (Phil. 4:4-7). We bear heavy burdens, which can destroy us physically and mentally and

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can also destroy relations. What a relief to lug the load before God and give it to him. If he can’t handle it, we certainly can’t. Many of us have known the great relief that comes at the end of a time of releasing our burdens.

Though prayer does unleash God’s power, it also produces great psychological benefits to the person who prays. Rather than enumerate them, we offer the challenge to prove the validity of this thesis by engaging in the prayer experience.

Then, God does answer prayer! None of us can explain how God’s power is let loose in the world. A classic discussion in the consideration of prayer deals with whether prayer changes God, circumstances, or the person who prays. Perhaps it does all three, depending on how they are understood. God an-

nounces his willingness to be “changed” through prayer, as he responds to the trust and faith of his children. God responds in ways he would not normally act otherwise. Changes of circumstances offer a more prickly problem, with many differing views.

Discussion of this issue can generate some heat among praying people. For myself, I see the major change coming in the third area—self. I do not know if God will change a malignant tumor to a benign one through prayer, but I am convinced that God changes those who pray. He helps them develop Christian virtues. He gives them wisdom. He molds them into the image of Christ and empowers their ministries. He makes them more loving. He aids them in resisting temptation. He gives them the release that only forgiveness offers. He tenders peace of mind.

Finally, let us consider some practical matters that may assist in the “mechanics” of private prayer. First, a private place is helpful, away from distraction, where a span of time without interruption can be enjoyed. For some this is easy, but for others it may prove more difficult. Prayers uttered while about the day’s duties are certainly of value, but intensive private prayers can bring the peace of being alone with God.

Second, many people find it helpful if some or all of the prayer is spoken aloud. This discourages a wandering mind, which many a praying person has experienced when praying silently.

Third, there are no biblical directives on how often and how long to pray. Christians ought not to

judge one another in this regard, and many factors can alter situations for individuals. It is surely wise, however, to have a regular program. Many commentators feel when Paul speaks in his letters of praying for his readers that he is implying a regular period for such activity.

Fourth, we might recall the observation of C. S. Lewis that the mind is affected by the position of the body. There is no one “approved” biblical posture of prayer. But some postures discourage moving quickly to alternative activities, and thus encourage concentration. Certain postures (e.g. kneeling) also produce a sense of reverence for some people.

Fifth, for those seeking a form for prayers, I would suggest the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6 and Luke 11) as a basic pattern, to be developed and supplemented as need demands. This is a comprehensive prayer which, if fully grasped, covers all areas of petition, and which can be supplemented with thanks and praise.

As a final observation, I would repeat that prayer is for the glory of God and the accomplishment of his purposes. When God acts for his glory, he is acting for the greatest good of his creatures. Prayer is not, then, an activity to be used selfishly, as if we were at the center and God were at the periphery. It is a great temptation to fall into this trap, but it must be avoided at all costs. Keeping God at the center of our prayers will enhance our devotional lives and further his work in us.